

## Profile: Edward VIII

*As the Public Record Office releases more documents concerning the abdication of King Edward VIII, BBC News Online looks at his life.*

King Edward VIII, who became the Duke of Windsor, found himself at the centre of a personal and political storm which shook the foundations of the monarchy. More than 30 years after his death, his life continues to intrigue and tantalise historians. Some commentators see him as a pampered playboy, whose louche lifestyle and numerous relationships with married women, most notably Mrs Simpson, made him unfit to be King. Others believe this outward appearance masked something much darker - a fascination with Nazism, possibly even a brooding determination to overthrow his brother George VI.



*The young Edward enjoyed a busy social life*

Edward was born on 23 June 1894. His father, who became George V in 1910, was a fierce disciplinarian. Besides Edward - always called David by his family - there were four other royal princes: Bertie - later George VI, Henry, George, and John. Edward, good-looking, raffish and easy going, was the pick of the crop.

### Dilemma

After becoming Prince of Wales in 1911 and serving in the Grenadier Guards during World War I, he became the darling of 1920s society. Life was a seemingly endless round of balls, cocktail parties and country house weekends. His penchant for married women was already well-known in aristocratic circles. During the early 1930s, Mrs Wallis Warfield Simpson, a divorcee from Baltimore, Maryland, was constantly with him.



*Edward was captivated by Wallis Simpson*

But there was another, more serious, side to Edward's character. During the Depression which followed the Wall Street Crash of 1929, he visited poverty-stricken areas of the UK and encouraged 200,000 unemployed men and women to join his back-to-work scheme. His popularity far outstripped that of his distant father. Following George V's death in January 1936, the new King faced two huge problems. The first was his love for Wallis Simpson: as King, and Supreme Governor of the Church of England, he could not marry a divorcee. He would have to choose between his country and his lover.

### Concentration camp

The second was that some felt that the new King was too sympathetic to Nazi Germany. Following Edward's accession, the German embassy in London sent a cable for the personal attention of Hitler himself. In part, it read: "An alliance between Germany and Britain is for him (the King) an urgent necessity." Alan Lascelles, Edward's private secretary, gave his own harsh judgment of the situation: "The best thing that could happen to him would be for him to break his neck."

45 Within the year Edward, pressurised by the Church of England, the government and royal  
courtiers, decided to abdicate. In October 1937, Edward and his wife - by now the Duke and  
Duchess of Windsor - visited Nazi Germany. They met Hitler, dined  
with his deputy, Rudolf Hess, and even visited a concentration camp.  
50 The camp's guard towers were explained away as meat stores for the  
inmates.

### **Bahamas**

55 At the outbreak of war, the duke served as a military liaison officer in  
Paris before eventually ending up in Lisbon after the French  
capitulation. Hitler, wishing to bring the duke into his camp, made an  
abortive attempt to coax Edward and his wife to Spain, which was then  
sympathetic to the Nazi cause.



*The Windsors visit  
Germany in 1937*

60 But the duke soon moved on to become Governor of the Bahamas  
from 1940-45. It was while he was there that he is said to have made his views explicit. He  
reputedly told a journalist that "it would be a tragic thing for the world if Hitler was  
overthrown". To an acquaintance on the island, the Duke reportedly said: "After the war is over  
and Hitler will crush the Americans...We'll take over...They (the British) don't want me as their  
65 King, but I'll be back as their leader."

After the war, the duke and duchess returned to France. He died there in 1972, while the  
Duchess lived on until 1986. Though the official Whitehall view was that "His Royal Highness  
never wavered in his loyalty to the British cause", the reputation of "the King who never was"  
70 seems destined to remain cloaked in ambiguity.